

# The darker face of classics

Barbara Goff

Classical literature has, throughout the ages, given many positive benefits to the world, in many guises: inspiration, for example, liberation, civilised values, and democracy. In other contexts, however, the system of classical education has been used to exclude certain groups and to downgrade them. This is especially true of people of African descent. During the period when African-born people were enslaved on the plantations of the American South, they were systematically denied education and then – perverse logic, this – it was held that their inability to read or write was a sign of their natural inferiority. Classical learning, seen as the pinnacle of European values, played a sad part in this process of oppression. The American scholar Henry Gates cites the story of a Southern politician who held that ‘Negroes’ could not be admitted to the ranks of the civilised until they could learn ancient Greek (a requirement which probably leaves most of us on the outside of ‘civilisation’). Mary Church Terrell, author of *A Colored Woman in a White World* (1940) reflects as follows on her experience of classical education in her youth:

*One day Matthew Arnold, the English writer, visited our class and Professor Frost asked me both to read the Greek and then to translate. After leaving the class Mr Arnold referred to the young lady who read the passage of Greek so well. Thinking it would interest the Englishman, Professor Frost told him I was of African descent. Thereupon Mr Arnold expressed the greatest surprise imaginable, because, he said, he thought the tongue of the African was so thick he could not be taught to pronounce the Greek correctly.*

Here it is not the Africans’ intellect but their actual physiology that is cited as preventing them from having access to the classics.

These instances of the classical establishment’s complicity in racist oppression are highly disturbing. In this article, however, I want to return to the more positive qualities of classics, that is to say, to its power to inspire challenges to such practices. In particular, I want to focus upon a brilliant play by the American poet Rita Dove. Titled *The Darker Face of the Earth*, it takes the Oedipus story of patricide and incest and transfers it to a plantation in the days of American slavery. This play – which was produced in London at the Royal National Theatre in 1999 – is the latest in a long line of reworkings of the Oedipus narrative, and also the most recent reuse of classical literature by an African-American writer.

Augustus Newcastle, the central figure (based on Oedipus), is the child of Amalia Jennings LaFarge, a white woman married to the plantation owner, and a black slave. Augustus is given away as a baby because his skin colour makes him an obvious sign of that most taboo of transgressions, interracial sex; but when he comes to adulthood, the mistress of the plantation buys him and so he returns to his birthplace. He becomes the lover of his mistress, who is also, unknown to all, his mother. In addition to this, he becomes involved in a slave rebellion. He accidentally kills the black slave who is his (unknown) father, and the other leaders of the rebellion become suspicious of his attachment to the white mistress. They assign him the duty of executing the master and mistress, but during the confrontation with these two, the story of his own birth comes out. He kills the master, his mother/mistress kills herself, and he is acclaimed as the hero of the rebellion; but it is clear as he leaves the stage that he is a broken man.

Amalia Jennings LaFarge is described in the directions as exhibiting ‘more intelligence and backbone than is generally credited to a Southern belle’. She has taken the initiative, before the play opens, in her social and sexual relations with slaves, especially with Hector, the father of her child. When the child is born, she is utterly brazen in presenting him to her husband Louis, and plans indeed to keep him. Prevailed upon to give the child away, she subsequently reinvents herself as the boss of the plantation and becomes more hard and masculine than Louis. ‘Miss Amalia hiked up her skirts/and pulled on man’s boots...And Massa Louis took off his riding breeches --...and shut himself upstairs’. She is the one who authorises the purchase of Augustus, and who then initiates the sexual relation with him. As befits a late twentieth-century rewriting, this new Oedipus play has a Jocasta full of drive and initiative (although even she cannot escape the Greek fate of suicide).

The new setting of the play, on the slave plantation, has tremendous significance, and alters the emphasis in many different ways. The transgression of incest and patricide is almost overshadowed by the transgression of interracial sex, which for Southern society at the time was, perhaps, considered more shocking and dreadful; and of course it is also overshadowed by the horror of slavery itself. It is not only Augustus and Amalia who suffer from disrupted family relations, since slavery systematically sold off parents separately from children, and husbands from wives. All the slaves on the plantation have similar stories of loss and bereavement to tell. Similarly, the intelligence and intellectual curiosity that characterise Sophocles’ Oedipus figure appear in a new light when transposed onto Augustus, on the plantation. Augustus cannot occupy the same kind of civic position as the Greek Oedipus, since as a slave he is not permitted such authority; but he does use his intelligence to help his community by organising the slave rebellion. And this is what destroys him, since it is during the rebellion that the truth of his identity comes out. His intelligence, determination and drive, which in a just society would have been put to a positive purpose, is used up in the fatal enquiry into his origins.

The play uses its Greek original in a number of ways, not just to provide the overall plot. During his eventful life Augustus has acquired a surprising amount of education, and he knows ‘Milton. The Bible./ And the Tales of the Greeks’. His extensive reading is one of the qualities which enable him to lead the other slaves. But it is also suggested that the Greek tales, ironically, contribute to his downfall, since as he says, ‘the Greeks/were a bit too predictable’ and he is caught up in a destiny which is constrained not only by slavery but also by the Oedipal narrative.

At the same time, however, we can see other ways in which the Greek play is at work within this new drama. The poet Rita Dove has reasserted the significance of the Oedipus narrative, in all its concerns about identity, intellectual courage and truth, for contemporary society and the challenges of multicultural community. She has reclaimed the Greek play in order to tell the story of African-Americans, people who were for a long time excluded from access to the ‘classics’ and all that they can mean. In this way she has reminded us of how classical knowledge has been used to exclude people – but she has also restated the liberating potential of the ancient stories. *The Darker Face of the Earth* is certainly a play to read whenever you are thinking about the uses to which classical literature have been put, and its power to reinvent itself for new generations.

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For more information on *The darker face of the earth*, go to <http://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/home.html>, click 'education', then 'workpacks'; scroll down to the bottom of the page, then click 'The Darker Face of the Earth'